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ABSTRACT

The evolution of the college open admissions policy since 1870 is described. In 1870 the University of Michigan faculty were authorized to inspect feeder secondary schools and waive entrance examinations for qualified candidates. This led to a liberalization of the subjects acceptable to major institutions as college preparatory courses. Another development was allowing high schools to certify certain graduates as meeting university entrance requirements without examination in return for having their schools inspected and accredited by universities. After World War I, college selective admissions policies moved from selecting those with proper academic preparation to selecting students who possessed "the ability to succeed in college." In the early 1900s, several states had laws prohibiting restrictions on student admission to college. However, universities practiced a subtle form of selective admissions by failing large proportions of the entering class during the freshman year. Around 1930, advocates of liberalization of admission policies argued that higher education could not be restricted to the elite. Later events emphasized nondiscriminatory college admissions policies. Consequences and problems of open admission programs are discussed. (SW)

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Selected Developments since the Late Eighteenth Century of the Open Admissions Policy in Higher Education

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The policy of open admissions in institutions of higher learning did not just spring into existence overnight. The origins of the policy can be traced through the historical development of educational practices and social consciousness; through the histories of institutional admissions policies and the evolution of attitudes relative to the worth of the individual.

One of the more concise histories of the evolution of admissions policies in institutions of higher learning is to be found in Wechsler's The Qualified Student: A History of Selective College Admission in America (1977). In this volume, Wechsler carefully traces and documents admissions practices from the highly selective elitist routines of the 1800's and earlier; through the liberalization of admissions standards between the two World Wars; and, finally, to the consequences of the social revolution of the 1960's wherein open admissions was to find its ultimate expression.

As Wechsler portrays this history, it was not until the late 1800's that an evolutionary event occurred which

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represented a marked departure from the minor and less significant modifications in admissions policies which preceded that event. It was in 1870 that the University of Michigan had a major admissions policy change. Prior to that date, the University had had an essentially passive admissions policy wherein students presented themselves, in person, to the faculty to undergo intensive faculty examination to determine their fitness for enrollment. The policy change was to a more active institutional posture wherein University faculty members inspected feeder secondary schools and waived entrance examinations for qualified and desirable candidates from those approved feeder schools. Other institutions in the Upper Midwest were soon to follow the University of Michigan's lead, and, by 1910, the movement had evolved sufficiently to cause a liberalization of the list of subjects acceptable to major institutions as college preparatory courses.

A subsequent innovation proceeding naturally from the active admissions policy was the "certificate" program in which high schools--in return for having their schools inspected and accredited by the universities--were permitted to "certify" certain of their graduates as having completed the universities' entrance requirements and being, therefore, eligible, without examination, for admission. It scarcely escaped anyone's notice that this had the effect of

allowing supervision of high schools--in terms of curriculum offerings and instructional quality--by the universities.

After World War I, the selective admissions policies of universities began a move away from one of selection of those with proper academic preparation to one of selecting for admission those students who possessed "the ability to succeed in college."

> The mechanism of selective admission, in which admission officers employ both academic and nonacademic criteria evolved only after World War I. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth most American colleges admitted students on the basis of straightforward, published entrance requirements. All students who could demonstrate acceptable mastery of the requirements were admitted; those who just missed were admitted conditionally; those who fell far short were sent home. (Wechsler, 1977, p. 4)

According to Wechsler, this employment of both academic and nonacademic criteria represented a step backward toward earlier elitism since it included, in addition to academic preparation, polish in the social skills.

By then, however, in the early 1900's, several states had passed laws making it illegal to place restrictions on student admission to institutions of higher learning. The effects of such legislation remained minimal because universities still practiced a subtle form of selective admissions simply through the ploy of flunking out large proportions of the entering class by the end of their first term or their freshman year. This form of subtle

selectivity was widely practiced; however, it is the rejection letter which was the most tangible symbol of the selective admissions policy of many institutions.

> The rejection letter is symbolic of higher education's important role in contemporary society. The competition for higher education is so keen that Äa collegeÅ can be highly selective about whom it admits. Admissions officers and committees continually make decisions about the kinds of men and woman who will occupy key positions in American society years hence. (Wechsler, 1977, p. 3)

Wechsler identified a period around 1930 that was to have broad and enduring effects on selective admissions policies. It was at this time that vocal advocates of liberalization of admissions policies began to make themselves heard in arguing that, in a democracy, higher education could not be restricted to the elite; that universities through their admissions policies had no right to determine who would be the leaders in our society in the years to come. The argument that a larger proportion of the population should have access to higher education resulted in several landmark events, one of the more notable of which was the establishment of the President's Commission on Higher Education. This Commission, appointed by President Truman in 1946, denounced, in no uncertain terms, discriminatory college admissions policies and recommended that Congress enact fair educational practices legislation. These first Presidentially sanctioned expressions of

increased access to higher education, coming as they did during a period of increasingly vocal demands for more and more liberalization of college entrance requirements, were sufficient stimuli, in the 1960's, for educational progressives to characterize universal higher education as a desirable national goal.

Should anyone believe that the voices speaking out for change were motivated solely by reasons of humanitarianism, it is well to recall that the social upheaval of the 1960's forced countless changes throughout our society. Some of these changes were, to be sure, based upon an increased awareness or appreciation of the worth of the individual, but some of them were based upon exigencies unrelated to humanitarianism. A few of this latter group of changes found their expression in the academic community.

For just one of these academically-related changes--the acceleration of the trend toward universal higher education characterized, at least in part, by open admissions--Wechsler tersely described his view of the underlying stimulus: "Coming at a time of heightened social concern for groups that had been victims of past discrimination, the prospect of rectifying past injustice simply by providing an opportunity for a college education seemed highly attractive" (Wechsler, 1977, p. 260).

In the fall of 1970, at CUNY, "the prospect of rectifying past injustice simply by providing an opportunity for a college education" manifested itself in what Wechsler characterized as "the most advanced embodiment of the theory of universal higher education" (Wechsler, 1977, p. 260) when the University guaranteed admission to a desired course of study to all graduates of New York City high schools. That event at that time and place is generally considered to be the prototype for all subsequent open admissions programs at all other locales.

To foreclose the belief that this prototype event was one of humanitarianism or benevolence, it should be remembered that at least a part of the motivation was otherwise. In April of 1968, Martin Luther King had been assassinated, and the consequential racial unrest was being expressed, often violently, in most major metropolitan areas throughout the country. One year later, in the spring of 1969, racially motivated Black and Puerto Rican students expressed their displeasure with the established order by seizing and occupying the South Campus of CUNY (Wechsler, 1977). This and other massive civil rights demonstrations were costing millions of dollars with resulting increases in funding requirements for New York City and New York state governmental agencies. Simultaneous with these events, Columbia University and other institutions of higher

education which typically drew their enrollees from New York City high schools were increasingly placing limits on their enrollment through selective admissions policies. The result was a racial imbalance in area institutions of higher learning which did not reflect the racial characteristics of the general population and which was rapidly becoming unacceptable (Wechsler, 1977).

As positive a practice as open admissions programs have proven to be, the origin of such programs was essentially a political response to a set of intolerable, negative circumstances. Wechsler (1977) describes the motivation for the program at CUNY in this way: "Broad political, rather than narrow academic, reasons underlay adoption of this 'Open Admissions' program" (p. 260).

It would be gratifying to state that the consequences of open admissions programs have been as positive as the basic idea itself, but this simply is not so. The consequences of such programs have been both praised and condemned by students, by school faculty and administrators, and by the general tax-paying public. This ambiguity of feelings concerning some of the consequences of open admissions programs has been expressed in countless ways. One such way in just one population is to be found in the volume A Handbook on Open Admissions: Success, Failure, Potential (Decker, Jody, & Brings, 1976), in which was

published the results of interviews with faculty members at Hunter College, New York, concerning the apparent failure or success of open admissions. Some of the faculty responses--in abbreviated or combined form--are as follows:

> --Support it in theory, but as a matter of practicality in terms of money, space, staff, facilities, preparation time, etc., it doesn't work.
>
> --Concerned about the maintenance of academic standards under the pressure of open admission.
>
> --Those of the faculty who expected the program to fail felt that it had. (p. 26)

But what of the students? Enrollment records leave no doubt that they have flocked to institutions of higher education in record numbers, but they, too, have ambiguous feelings about the opportunity afforded them under open admissions programs. To be sure, there are more success stories than one can count, but many students--far too many--are enrolling for all the wrong reasons, such as parental or peer pressure, misconceptions about the purpose and value of a college education, a vague notion about "bettering one's self," or some other motive, equally intangible. And when, under the pressure of academic requirements, these reasons fail to resolve themselves into something more tangible or motivational, disillusionment sets in and the institution itself becomes the victim of the student's frustration or boredom. Trow (1971) expressed it this way:

> In the recent past, attendance in our system of mass higher education was voluntary--a privilege that had in some places become a right, but not yet for many an obligation. Whether seen as a privilege (as in certain selective, mostly private, institutions) or as a right (in unselective, mostly public, institutions), voluntary attendance carried with it an implicit acceptance of the character and purpose of the institution as defined by "the authorities." The authority of trustees or administrators or faculty to define the nature of the education and its requirements could be evaded, but was rarely challenged by the students. With few exceptions, students played little or no role in the government of the institution.
>
> The growth of enrollments and the movement toward universal higher education has made enrollment in college increasingly obligatory for many students, and their presence there has become increasingly "involuntary." In this respect, in some strata and places, colleges begin to resemble elementary and secondary schools, where compulsory attendance has long been recognized as increasing problems of student motivation, boredom, and the maintenance of order.... As more and more college-age youth go on to college, not to be or to have been a college student becomes increasingly a lasting stigma, a mark of some special failing of mind or character, and a grave handicap in all the activities and pursuits of adult life.
>
> The net effect of these forces and conditions is to make college attendance for many students nearly involuntary, as a result of external pressures and constraints, some of which do not even have the legitimacy of parental authority behind them. The result is that we are finding in our classrooms large numbers of students who really do not want to be in college, have not entered into willing contract with it, and do not accept the values or legitimacy of the institution. (Trow, 1971, pp. 36-37)

In concluding this examination of the forces operating upon and within the Open Admissions Policy, it is sufficient to say that, irrespective of the multitude of perspectives

and opinions concerning open admissions programs, it is clearly evident that such programs exist and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future. What is not so evident are the forms and consequences of the almost certain evolution of such programs. Perhaps they will continue to exist in forms only slightly different from those of today. Perhaps they will eventually be rejected as a social experiment that failed. Perhaps, though, the programs will find some middle ground and will evolve into a form which professes to be open admissions in its purest form and, yet, which incorporates some subtle form of selection or elimination not yet routine in open admissions programs. Decker, Jody, and Brings (1976) expressed just such a subtlety in stating the following:

> Inherent in an effort to maintain academic standards is a willingness on the part of the institution to agree that college is not for everyone and that students should be counseled out as well assisted in remaining.... This is, of course, especially true in a school with Open Admissions students, many of whom have been encouraged to attend college for all the wrong reasons. These students should feel as free to leave as to enter. (Decker, Jody, & Brings, 1976, p. 52)

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